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# A SKETCH

OF THE LIFE OF

## GEORGE ROBERTS

WHO FOUGHT UNDER

## JOHN PAUL JONES

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*That the man behind the gun may not be forgotten.*

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1905

REPRINT WITH CORRECTIONS AND  
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*COMPLIMENTS OF*

*CHAS. H. ROBERTS,*

*CONCORD, N. H.*















## A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF GEORGE ROBERTS.

By Charles H. Roberts.



WHEN in the summer of 1901 I made a short visit to the home of my boyhood a letter, of which the following is a copy, was handed me by the postmaster:

GEO. W. FEATHERSTONHAUGH,  
*Counselor at Law.*

SCHENECTADY, N. Y., July 28, 1901.

*Postmaster of Middleton, N. H.*

DEAR SIR: About seventy years ago one George Roberts who fought under Paul Jones in the battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis* died at Middleton, N. H., and I presume he must have been buried there.

If so, it must be a fact well known in your town, to those interested in local history.

Can you kindly inform me if the grave of this man is in your place, and if so, where and what monument marks the spot and what the inscription says of him?

If the facts are not within your knowledge kindly hand this letter to some one who would be likely to know. I take the liberty of troubling you as I know no one in your town to address. The purpose of my inquiry is simply for historical information.

Very respl. yours,

GEO W. FEATHERSTONHAUGH.

I answered this letter giving him, so far as I was then able to do, the information sought. Later on I received the following:

SCHENECTADY, N. Y., Sept. 27, 1901.

*C. H. Roberts, Esq., Concord, N. H.*

DEAR SIR: I was much gratified at receiving an answer to the inquiry which I sent out in July last and also much surprised at its coming from a grandson of George Roberts. I have always been interested in the life of Paul Jones and the brave men who fought with him. The battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis* always seemed to me to be the most terrific contest ever fought upon the sea.

Reading last winter the life of Paul Jones by Cyrus T. Brady I was struck with his description of this battle. He says, "A daring sailor ran out upon the main yardarm which hung over the after hatch of the *Serapis* and began to throw grenades down the hatchway. At last a hand grenade struck the hatch combing, bounded aft and fell into the midst of a pile of cartridges. There was a terrific crash which silenced the roar of the battle. When the smoke cleared away the decks were filled with the dead and dying. It was this last shock that determined Pearson to surrender."

I determined to investigate the truth of the statement and to ascertain if possible the name of the man who could perform such an act of unparalleled bravery. The result of my investigation has been that the act was performed as described by Mr. Brady, and the name of the sailor beyond all doubt was George Roberts.

I then attempted to find out who George Roberts was, where he had lived and died. At last I located him in Middleton, N. H., and concluding that he might have died there and been buried there I wrote my letter. I should be much pleased if you could give me some account of his birth, life, etc., as well as inscription on stone.

I am glad to learn that you are to publish a sketch of his life and services. In these times of the revival of interest in the American Revolution it cannot fail to attract attention. The part your grandfather acted in the battle between the *Richard* and *Serapis* not only showed his great bravery, but was of the first importance and far reaching, and should not be lost sight of in the passing years. The American sailor, the man behind the gun, should have the credit due to him.

Very sincerely yours,

GEO. W. FEATHERSTONHAUGH.

[In response to a letter to Mr. Featherstonhaugh, inquiring how his attention was first called to the matter of services rendered by George Roberts, I received the following under date of June 18, 1902:



My great grandmother lived at Scarborough, England, at the time of the battle between the *Richard* and *Serapis*. Her son, after whom I am named, and who was a Fellow of the Royal Society, author, etc., became an extensive traveler in the United States, recording in his journal everything of interest. These journals are now unfortunately destroyed except a very few. In one of the earlier ones between 1808 and 1813 he mentioned meeting a man who was one of the crew of the *Richard*, who stated that the *Serapis* surrendered because her magazine was exploded by a common sailor named "Robertson," from New England states, who threw down explosives from the rigging of the *Richard* upon the deck of the *Serapis*. My attention was next called to the matter by an article in an old newspaper, on the death of George Roberts. I at once recognized the "daring sailor" mentioned by Brady as the "Robertson" of my grandfather's journal and the George Roberts of the newspaper article.]

George Roberts was born at Dover, New Hampshire, August 21, 1755. He was in direct descent from Thomas Roberts who settled at Dover Neck in 1623. There is nothing authentic as to where he emigrated from, but there is a tradition that he came from near Chester, England. The land upon which he settled is still owned in the Roberts family. George was of the fifth generation, the genealogy being as follows: Thomas (1), Thomas (2), Nathaniel (3), Nathaniel (4), George (5); his brothers were David, Isaac and Nathaniel.

His father was lost at sea, and his sailor brother, Isaac, met a like fate. When a lad George went to sea as a cabin boy, and when quite a young man was mate of a vessel trading between Portsmouth, N. H., and the West Indies.

As related by him his vessel took out the first ice ever shipped to those islands, and when the negroes came on board to unload the vessel, they dropped the first cake of ice, crying

out, "It burns our fingers." On May 29, 1775, he enlisted for two months in Capt. Jonathan Wentworth's company in Colonel Poor's New Hampshire regiment, and served as a sergeant until August first of that year.

Poor's regiment was not at Bunker Hill, but was guarding the coast. Later it became a part of General Washington's army at Dorchester.

He gave as his reason for not re-enlisting that he preferred going to war on the water rather than trudging around on land, carrying a heavy knapsack and musket, and that he disliked his captain, who, it seems, was subsequently tried by court martial and dismissed from the service.

In the month of September, 1777, he enlisted as a mariner on board the continental ship of war, *Ranger*, commanded by John Paul Jones.

The *Ranger* was built at Portsmouth, N. H., and sailed on the 1st of November, 1777.

In this connection the following letters are of interest:

PORTSMOUTH, August 29, 1777.

GENTLEMEN: As the continental ship of war *Ranger* under my command is ready for sea—and as I have particular orders from Congress to proceed with all possible expedition—I take the liberty of applying to you for authority to enlist a few men from the Forts and garrisons in the Harbour, whereby I may be enabled with the greater facility to complete my compliment and to fulfil the instructions of Congress . . .

I am with due respect Gentlemen,

Your most obedient very humble servant,

JNO. P. JONES.

To the Hon'ble The Committee of Safety  
for the state of New Hampshire.

—  
PORTSMOUTH, Sept. 20, 1777.

MR. SPEAKER & GENTLEMEN: The enclosed letter to the Committee of Safety having produced no effect, I think it my duty to lay it be-



fore, you,—as the departure of the *Ranger* is now impeded solely for the want of the liberty which I then asked and which I now hope to obtain from you.

United as the continent is its interest must take precedence of all private concerns in every patriot breast, and as I hope I have served without blame since the first establishment of the Navy, I am persuaded I shall meet with the same countenance and assistance from you which any other officer hath experienced.

Meantime, I have the honor to be, with sentiments of respect,

Gentlemen, your most obedient

Very humble servant,

J. P. J.

The Hon'ble The Speaker and Representatives  
of the State of New Hampshire.

On October, 30, 1777, Jones wrote to his friend Joseph Hewes, member of the Continental Congress from North Carolina :

I have been for some time and am now detained by a heavy gale from the N. E. When it clears up I propose to embrace the first wind that can convey me thro' the *enemies' lines*, and off the coast. I have received orders and dispatches for France and hope to be the welcome messenger at Paris of Burgoyne's surrender.

The *Ranger* finally sailed in such haste that a part of her "small stores" were left on shore, and when at sea it was discovered that but thirty gallons of rum had been taken on board.

She arrived at Nantes, France, December 2, 1777. From Nantes she sailed for Brest, reaching there on the 13th of February, 1778, where Jones saluted the French admiral with thirteen guns, which was returned with nine. This was the first salute to the American flag by a foreign man of war.

[Sometime previous to the salute, Jones wrote the following letter to William Carmichael, who was secretary to the American Commissioners to France :

RANGER, 13, Feb. 1778.

MY DEAR SIR : You will confer a singular obligation upon me by presenting my respects to the French Admiral, whom I mean to salute with thirteen guns under American colours—provided he will accept the compliment and return gun for gun. This proposal I hope will be the more acceptable to him as it may be a prelude to future amity between the United States and his Court.—I shall be happy to see you here as soon as possible after you have the Admiral's answer—meantime pray excuse this trouble.—I am my dear sir with sentiments of esteem and respect

Your very obliged

very obedient

most humble servant

JNO. P. JONES.

On the same day the French Admiral wrote to Captain Jones that if the *Ranger* and *Independence* salute "The flag of the King" with thirteen guns, the salute will be returned with nine. On February 14 Carmichael wrote Jones that he is convinced that further application for salute of gun for gun will be fruitless; common salute is three guns for twenty-one; to show respect for "the flag of Congress" the Admiral will return nine guns; desires this to be accepted.]

After leaving France the *Ranger* cruised in the Irish channel, taking several unimportant prizes. She then entered Whitehaven where they seized the forts, spiked the cannon, and set fire to a ship in the midst of a hundred other vessels. This exploit of Jones spread terror on the coast and was no doubt the cause of associating his name with the idea of piracy.

When my grandfather was asked if he supposed he was fighting with a halter about his neck he answered that he thought if Jones or any of his men had been captured their lives would no doubt have been in great



jeopardy, possibly nothing would have saved them, but the fear of retaliation. That the British government held them to be outlaws is shown by the following official communication:

Sir Joseph Yorke, the British ambassador to France, addressed the following letter to the French government:

HAGUE, Oct. 13, 1779.

HIGH AND MIGHTY LORDS: The undersigned Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the King of Great Britain, has the honor to communicate to your High Mightinesses, that two of His Majesty's ships the *Serapis* and the *Countess of Scarborough* arrived some days ago in the Texel, having been attacked and taken by force by a certain Paul Jones, a subject of the king, who, according to treaties and the laws of war, can only be considered as a rebel and pirate.

Again he writes:

. . . I cannot but comply with the strict orders of His Majesty by renewing in the strongest and most pressing manner his request that these ships and their crews may be stopped and delivered up, which the pirate Paul Jones of Scotland, who is a rebel subject and a criminal to the state has taken. . . .

My grandfather's account of the landing in Scotland, and taking away the plate of the Earl of Selkirk, was as follows:

That the people at the castle at first thought them to be a British press gang, and when they found they were Paul Jones's men they were greatly alarmed, but the American officers very soon quieted their fears; both officers and men were served with plenty of food and drink; that there was very little looting aside from the plate; that among other trifles, an old sailor whose life had been spent on the ocean, accumulated a pair of gilt spurs, his attempt to util-

ize them being extremely ludicrous; he tried them on his nose, hands and feet, and finally threw them away with great disgust saying, "I don't see any use to which the blanked things can be put."

Shortly after the Whitehaven exploit, occurred the engagement with and capture of the British ship *Drake*. My grandfather said that he went on board the *Drake* after her capture and saw there the dead body of an English officer in the uniform of the land service, and that an English sailor afterwards told him that this officer came on board to see them whip the Yankees, and that a hogshead of rum which had been sent on board to drink to their victory had been demolished by a cannon ball.

The *Ranger* took her prize to France where Captain Jones left the ship. She subsequently sailed for Portsmouth, under command of Capt. Thomas Simpson, where the crew was discharged.

Late in the month of June, 1779, he sailed from Portsmouth, for France, joining the *Bon Homme Richard* a few days before the departure of Jones's little squadron, which sailed on August 14. The battle with the *Serapis* was fought on September 23, 1779.

It is a matter of unwritten history in our family that when he left Portsmouth he was accompanied by fourteen others, several of whom had served on the *Ranger*, and that among the number were Joseph Roberts and Isaac Hanson, who afterwards lived in Farmington, and died there, Timothy Roberts of Milton, who lived and died in that town, and Caleb Roberts of Rochester. On



which vessel of the squadron they served I have no positive information.

Mr. Oliver A. Roberts of Melrose, Mass., who has in preparation a genealogy of the Roberts family, states that the five named above served on the *Ranger*, and some, if not all of them, on the *Bon Homme Richard*.

After his final discharge from the service he made his home for several years at Dover, but followed the sea as an occupation. The parish records show that he was married to Elizabeth Horn, January 17, 1782, by Rev. Jeremy Belknap. In 1796 he moved to Middleton, where he built his cabin near Moose Mountain and cleared the virgin forest from some twenty acres. Subsequently he moved to a small farm on the stage road leading from Dover to Wolfborough, where he continued to live and till the soil of that quiet town.

The old men of the town said of him that he was a good neighbor, but not a very good farmer; not given to boasting of his achievements, very rarely talking of them unless urged to do so. That the bears and wildcats had no terrors for him, and the only living thing he feared was a snake, and to the most harmless of these reptiles he gave a wide berth.

Being rallied at one time by his companions regarding the taking of the plate of the Earl of Selkirk, he answered, "After taking away what we did, we left the earl more plate than all of you have, or ever will have."

One of his nearest neighbors, a man by the name of Hinah, was one of the 22,000 sold by the notorious Frederick II of Hesse to George III

to fight his battles in America; he was captured at Trenton, but after the war made his way to the wilds of New Hampshire, settling in Middleton. He became a good citizen and an officer of the militia. His broken English was a source of much amusement to his men, and when going on parade he gave the order "Moosuc to der froont," the smiles were audible. Between my grandfather and this old Teuton a warm friendship existed, and they spent much time in the company of each other, cheering themselves with their pipes, and an occasional sip of the wine of New England.

In religious belief his family were followers of Penn. In his youth he affiliated with that sect, but in later life he neither wore the Quaker garb nor attended the meeting, but continued on cordial terms with his relatives and others of that faith. My grandmother was a member of the Baptist Church, but I well remember that her home, and my father's as well, was the stopping place for Friends on their way to the yearly meeting at Sandwich, and when these visits occurred our family observed the Quaker grace at mealtime. My grandmother related that during her husband's last illness and shortly before his death, his brother David, a strict Friend, visited him, and, when about to take his departure, went to the bedside of his sick brother and said: "Peace be with thee, George." "Peace be with thee, David," was the answer; and thus the brothers parted, to meet no more on earth.

The story of how the Roberts family were converted to the faith of the Society of Friends is interesting.

The emigrant, Thomas Roberts,



was chosen president of the court (council). His son John was appointed marshal, and his son Thomas was a constable of Dover. During their term of office the Quaker persecutions in Dover occurred. Several women of that faith had been arrested, and the court adjudged them guilty and ordered them to be whipped at the cart's tail through nine towns. The duty of the infliction of this penalty in Dover fell to John and Thomas Roberts. While the order of the court was being carried out in a very cruel manner, their father, Thomas Roberts, followed after, lamenting and crying, "Wo! that I am the father of such wicked children." The patience and humility with which these poor women bore their wrongs so impressed him that he investigated their belief, the result being that he and his family became members of the Society of Friends with which their descendants were also identified for several generations.

In the military history of George Roberts, on file at the pension office in Washington, I found the following:

In his declaration for pension he makes no allusion to any service other than that on the *Ranger*, owing, no doubt, to the fact that the law under which he applied, Act of March 18, 1818, required but nine months' service in the Continental establishment. His widow, who applied for and was granted a pension after his death, stated that he also served on the *Bon Homme Richard* under Capt. John Paul Jones in the celebrated conflict with the British ship *Serapis*.

He filed with the pension office an inventory of his property, which was as follows:

Two oxen (small),	\$40.00
One cow,	13.00

Three swine,	\$7.00
Old homestead furniture,	5.00
Land, 25 acres,	<u>125.00</u>
	\$190.00
Debts owed,	\$40.00

I also found, in connection with his application for pension a certificate as to his service from Ezra Green of Dover, surgeon of the *Ranger*, and from John Ricker, seaman, there being no official roll in existence of the men who served on that ship.

The sum granted him was \$8 per month; his widow received \$63.44 per annum.

My grandfather died on the 12th of May, 1829, leaving one son, my father. My grandmother survived him some thirty years, and from her I obtained much of the material for this sketch. A marble headstone marks the place where his ashes rest, in the family burial lot on the old homestead.

The inscription on the stone is as follows:

George Roberts  
died  
May 12, 1829,  
A. E. 73 y'rs, 8 mo.  
& 21 d'ys:  
A soldier of the Revolution.

The sea chest, brought home by him after his discharge from the *Ranger*, is in possession of my nephew, Natt F. Roberts of Farmington.

[Not long after his death a communication from an old sailor, who had served with him, appeared in a Natchez, Miss., paper, the same being reproduced in my sketch of the life of George Roberts, printed in *The Granite Monthly* for August, 1902, as I then supposed in full. At



that time I did not feel quite sure that it was first published in the Natchez paper; as the name of Commodore Dale was mentioned I thought it might have been first printed in Philadelphia; later on I searched the newspaper files at the library of Congress and found in *Paulson's American Daily Advertiser* of Philadelphia of June 3, 1829, the following obituary notice:

Died in Middleton, N. H., May 12, 1829 George Roberts, aged 74 years, a Revolutionary soldier. He was an able seaman, and served under the renowned John Paul Jones on board the *Ranger*, was at the taking of the *Drake*, a very superior ship after a severe action of one hour and forty-five minutes, and had charge of two guns in that quarter of the ship called by the seamen the "slaughter house." He was a favorite of his captain and first of his boat's crew.

In the same paper in the issue of November 14, 1829, the following appeared:

#### REMINISCENCE OF PAUL JONES.

[From the *Natchez* (Miss.) *Ariel*.]

MR. EDITOR:—I observed in a late number of your paper a notice of the death of George Roberts of Middleton, N. H., at the age of 74 years. The notice of his death was crowded into that column of your paper usually allotted to the recording of such events, and among notices of the decease of several other Revolutionary soldiers, it stated his numerous services; that he had served under Paul Jones on various occasions, and that he was an able seaman.]

SIR:—I knew George Roberts well. I served with him under our noble commander, in the same ship, and on the same perilous cruises, and fought side by side in the same engagements, and that he was an able seaman, an honest man, and a brave man, is true, and it is the desire of an old man to offer a tribute to the memory of an old fellow-sailor.

We were sailors under Paul Jones, in his expedition against the British in 1778, when he terrified the commerce of that country by constantly hovering about the coast of Scotland and Ireland, though having only a ship of eighteen

guns. When Jones landed on the coast of Scotland, and took away all the family plate of the Earl of Selkirk, Roberts was one of the sailors who marched into the castle while that strange deed was done. I remained on board the ship. The plate was all brought on board and safely disposed of; though as it turned out, much to the commodore's loss, as he afterwards bought it up in Paris and returned it to the owner. He intended to capture the earl and detain him as a hostage, but being absent from home at the time we landed it was prevented.

In 1779, Roberts and I sailed again under our noble commander from Brest in France, in the *Good Man Richard*, carrying 40 guns and 420 men. She was an old ship, and not fit for the hard service we put her to, as it afterwards came out. On the 22d of September, off Flamborough Head, we fell in with the Baltic fleet, under the convoy of the frigate *Serapis*, of 56 guns, and of the sloop *Countess of Scarborough*, a very heavy ship, but I do not recollect hearing how many guns she carried. Just as the moon rose, at eight in the evening, the enemy fired his first broadside, when within pistol shot of us. And now a most murderous scene began.

The action raged with horrid violence, and the blood ran ankle deep out of the ship's scuppers. Our rigging was cut to atoms, and finally both ships took fire, so that both friend and foe were obliged to rest from fighting that they might extinguish the flames. The *Richard* being old, was soon shot through and through and began to sink. In this awful condition, Jones's voice was heard above the din of the battle, ordering to grapple with the enemy. We accordingly made our ship fast to the *Serapis*, and it was easily done, as the two ships were so near each other that when I drew out the rammer to the gun I belonged to, the end of it touched the side of the *Serapis*. Thus fastened together, we fought without resting, until nearly all our guns were burst or dismantled—the ship nearly full of water—and Lieutenant Grubb shot dead by Jones's own pistol, for hauling down the colors without orders, and which happened at my elbow, our decks covered with dead and dying, and our ship cut up into splinters.

While in this awful and desperate situation, my friend Roberts, seeing how near spent we were, jumped on to the main yard of our vessel, which projected directly over the decks of the *Serapis*, with a bundle of hand grenades. These he contrived to throw down upon the *Serapis's* deck, and succeeded in blowing up two or three of their powder chests, the explosion of which killed and wounded a great many men. The



captain of the *Serapis* perceiving his activity, ordered some shots fired at Roberts. One of them struck the rope by which he supported himself, and caused him to fall on the gunwale of the enemy's ship, which observing, I caught hold of him and pulled him aboard. He immediately got on the same yard-arm again, with a fresh supply of hand grenades, and made such dreadful havoc on the enemy's deck that in a few minutes they surrendered. For this great bravery Paul Jones publicly thanked him on the quarter-deck of the *Serapis* the next afternoon, giving him double allowance of grog for the week afterwards.

It was near midnight when the action terminated. The top of Flamborough Head, which is a high rock that overlooks the sea, was covered with people watching the engagement, and dreadful the sight must have been. The next day, our ship sunk, being fairly battered to pieces by the enemy's shot, as they poured a murderous fire into us all the while. Commodore Dale, who died in Philadelphia about two years ago, was Jones's second lieutenant, and was badly wounded about the middle of the action.<sup>1</sup> He was ordered to go below though he still wished to fight on deck. After he went down he was very useful in taking care of a large number of English prisoners we had on board. We had 135 men killed, and nearly as many wounded and missing. The *Serapis* had about the same number killed as we had, and had 80 wounded.

Captain Pearson, the English commander, fought nobly, and defended his ship to the last. He had nailed his flag to the mast, and was afraid to haul it down when he surrendered, as none of his men would go up to tear it away, because they dreaded our sharpshooters in our round tops. So when he concluded to give up, he mounted the gunwale just where I was standing, and called out in a loud voice, "We surrender, we surrender." Captain Jones not hearing this, I left my gun and ran and told him of it. He instantly ordered the firing to cease and the flag hauled down, but no Englishman would do it, as musket shots were still exchanged between the two vessels. On hearing this George Roberts jumped aboard the enemy's ship, mounted the tattered shrouds, and hacked down the British ensign from its proud height. As it fell, what I consider as very remarkable, a cap full of wind took it and laid it directly at Jones's feet, at the same time spreading it nearly all over the dead body of Lieutenant Grubb, who in the heat of the fight was lying dead upon the deck. When the crew of the *Richard* saw the flag fall, they gave thirteen tremendous cheers, at which Captain Pearson shrunk back from his high stand into the shadow of his mizzen mast.

When we returned from this cruise, being affected in my hearing by a splinter, which struck me under the ear, I left the service, and heard no more of my friend Roberts, from that time until I saw his death inserted in your paper. He was a true-hearted and honest man, and bold to a degree not to be daunted. He was younger than me, and yet he has closed his eyes in that sleep to which all of us, soldiers or not, must one day give up. J. H.

A copy of a paper containing the above communication was in possession of my grandmother. A few years after the death of her husband, she made application for a pension through Hon. Nehemiah Eastman, lawyer, of Farmington, and gave him the paper. In 1855 it was found in Mr. Eastman's scrap book by Asa McFarland of Concord, editor of the *New Hampshire Statesman*, who made it the basis for a letter to his paper, which appeared in the issue of August 11, of that year.

The scrap book is now in the library of Mr. Fred R. Gilman of Laconia, a relative of the Eastman family.

[In acknowledgment of receipt of magazines and copy of sketch, I received the following :

SCHENECTADY, N. Y., Aug. 27, 1902.

Mr. Charles H. Roberts.

MY DEAR SIR: Your magazines and pamphlets were duly received for which please accept my thanks. I was much interested in reading the article on your grandfather. There has always been some controversy among writers on John Paul Jones's life, as to whether Pearson had actually nailed his flag to the mast or whether it was merely a figure of speech. The article of the "Old Sailor," which you publish, seems to me to dispose of this question, for your grandfather had to climb the mast in order to cut down the flag. The article is no doubt correct in all its detail, as it was written at a time and by a man removed from all motive of embellishment and before any of these nice points had arisen among historians and critics.

I have cut down one of your pamphlets and bound it in the back of my favorite history of the Life of John Paul Jones, that it may throw a new light on an old subject for those who may come after me.

Very sincerely yours,

GEO. W. FEATHERSTONHAUGH.

<sup>1</sup>In the biographical notice of Commodore Dale in *Appleton's Encyclopedia*, he is credited with the rank of *first lieutenant* at the time of the battle.































LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



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